

## Bridging the Needs of Marginalized Children from Malaysian Plantations: The Role of Community-Based Kindergarten Initiatives

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### Abstract

*As Malaysia underwent development in the 1970s, children aged four to six years from marginalized communities had unmet needs, which included care, education, proper nutrition, and a safe environment. This article illuminates the effort to effect changes in harsh environments in which these children lived, cradled on the canvas of Malaysia's socioeconomic and political realities tied to her colonial past. It addresses uneven development causing deprivation of children beginning in the rubber plantations. This article brings to the fore some civil society players bridging these needs and then pays attention to the efforts of one grassroots organization, Persatuan Guru-guru Tadika Zone Utara Malaysia (PGT, Malaysian Kindergarten Teachers Association, Northern Zone) in its approach for the wellbeing of children from marginalized communities. Its efforts in bringing its particular approach through community-based kindergartens follow. Data for this article was drawn from interviews with individuals involved historically and those currently involved with PGT. These were conducted between April 2021 to October 2022. Secondary data, such as bulletin photographs, were also sourced. Findings reveal a process-based, context-sensitive methodology through community-based kindergartens. Community kindergarten educators were empowered as change agents to reach out to children in marginalized communities through the active participation of parents/community. This methodology, which has proven itself, has the potential to be replicated in marginalized communities.*

**Keywords:** Children's Needs, Community-Based Kindergartens, Early Childhood, Child Well-Being, Uneven Development

### INTRODUCTION

Children have inherent needs ranging from physical growth to socio-emotional development for their wellbeing. In ancient India, children were gathered in their villages where elderly women cared for them by introducing them to the world of knowledge. These elderly women were generally known as Aviyar. In the Malay Peninsula, young Muslim children were introduced to the tenets of their faith by religious educators while other communities cared for the needs of their children in their own way. In the context of the modernization of society, these needs were encroached upon as children became part of the labor force through industrialization. Consequently, the League of Nations adopted the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of Children in 1924, among which was the need for protection from exploitation, but it was only in 1989 that the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was adopted by the United Nations ([unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)). The CRC is the point of reference for the recognition of the child's right to its needs, which includes the need for care and education for children aged four to six years, includes the need for care & education. While Malaysia's national policy for preschool education (an interchangeable term for kindergarten and primary education) emerged only in 1996, the education of kindergarten children was taking place through government agencies and statutory bodies in the 1970s (CDC 2007).

Malaysia's five-year economic plans, which rolled out development through the New Economic Policy (NEP) between 1971 and 1990 with a twin objective to eradicate poverty and restructure society, began from the Second Malaysian Plan, ensuring development without leaving any group behind (GOM, 1971). However, there were children who could not access development taking place through education and health. One particular group was tied to the history of rubber plantations through British colonialism. Children of plantation labor were not part of the development equation. Their marginalization was in the context of the marginalization of

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their parents and generations before. While their peers in some other rural areas and in urban areas were beginning to access kindergarten education in the 1970s, some children from plantations followed their rubber-tapper parents, cleaning latex cups and collecting scrap rubber.

Such deprivation caught the attention of Malaysia's academia in the 1970s, highlighting the need for preschool education in deprived areas through conferences. One such conference was by the University Malaya in 1973 with the support of the Ministry of Education and the Bernard Van Leer Foundation (Dewan et al., 1975). Another example is by a government agency, i.e., the Socio-Economic Research Unit of the Prime Minister's Department, about the state of education among plantation children. However, there was no state response to provide kindergarten education for children of plantation workers. In the meantime, the poverty of the plantation workers, as reported in the Fourth Malaysian Plan, rose from 35 percent in 1980 to 55 percent in 1983 (GOM, 1984). While there were other groups of marginalized children, among them from the Indigenous communities in the Peninsular as well as in Sabah and Sarawak, it is in the context of plantations that this paper addresses the needs of marginalized children through kindergarten initiatives. As Murray and Rudolph (2019) assert, it is essential to prioritize kindergarten initiatives in the context of social justice and not dominant discourses of technically determined outcomes.

The collective effort, innovation, and leadership provided through community-based initiatives play a center-stage role in response to addressing the needs of society (Igalla et al., 2020). In the context of Malaysia, several marginalized communities have taken initiatives to bridge gaps in the needs of their children using creative methodologies within a framework of social justice. The paper contextualizes such efforts, followed by mapping kindergarten initiatives for plantation children. Next, the paper pays attention to the efforts of PGT as a community-based organization. Next, its efforts to address these needs through a social justice framework and the democratization of kindergarten education while bringing a particular approach through community-based kindergartens.

### **Contextualizing community-based kindergarten initiatives**

The history of the rubber plantation sector, embedded in its British colonial history of mass migration of South Indian indentured labor mainly from Tamil Nadu, India, and its exploitation by colonial powers, is well documented by scholars (e.g., Jain 1970 and 2016) and a subaltern voice (Manickam, 2009). That exploitation included the transfer of surplus from the plantation sector to developed countries (Khor, 1983) at the expense of Malaya, as well as the labor responsible for producing the wealth. Despite the transfer, the plantation sector played an important role in the development of Malaya. The deplorable, inhumane conditions and low wages, together with inhibiting cultural practices, were contested by the working class through the left-labor movement but were suppressed with force by the British (Stenson, 2018). The continual supply of labor for the plantations was made possible by ensuring that the children of these workers, in turn, became plantation labor. This was accomplished by a lack of schooling or by ensuring the ineffectiveness of the Tamil primary school when legislation was required, as Sandhu (1993) posits and which Marimuthu (1993) analyses its role as an agent of social reproduction. The economic exploitation and social realities continued after independence. Nagarajan (2008) brings to the fore the impact of Malaysia's economic transformation, resulting in the eviction of Indians from the plantations and the consequent socio-economic problems in urban pioneer areas as there was no alternative housing and programs for evicted communities. Kindergarten education for children of plantation workers in Malaya at independence and later, during the transformation of the Malaysian economy, was not a state responsibility given its private property status. An estimate of one cohort of 40 children aged seven from 118 plantation schools, i.e., Kedah (39), Perak (23), and Negeri Sembilan (56) in 1963, gives a figure of 4720 children ([www.tamilschool.com](http://www.tamilschool.com)). This is the background to the activities of civil society groups with a focus on kindergarten-aged children in the plantation sector.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Early Childhood Care and Education**

There is an abundant body of literature on various approaches to early childhood care and education, an area related to meeting the needs of children aged four to six years old based on various theories, generally child development theories. There are various theories of child development, the most influential being Piaget's theory of stage development, in which Piaget identifies four stages through which children's learning development takes place (Piaget, 1955). He identified a universal way in which children learn according to their ages. Kindergarten-aged children fall in the pre-operational stage. Another theory is the social constructivist theory, as developed by Prout and James (1997), who hold that children interact in their environment through interactions. The premise is that children have agency in their learning, bringing more nuanced meanings to childhood. These different theories result in different approaches, among which are related to play (Taylor & Boyer, 2020; Moyles, 2014). There are also different learning models, which Aljabreen (2020) brings together through a comparative analysis of the Montessori, Waldorf, and Reggio Emilia models.

In an era where the market economy has impacted preschool education or kindergarten education, all interchangeable terms, economic lexicon has made its way through the use of the human capital theory, i.e., another child development theory but which focuses on returns to investment as propounded by Heckman and Masterov (2007). The use of managerial concepts to measure children's outcomes and transfer of failure of students to parents is among the concerns of scholars from the deconstruction and re-construction of early childhood (Moss, 2018; Urban, 2019). Though this theory has received criticism from scholars, it has gained currency in national education policies in many regions worldwide, including Malaysia.

However, another approach to meeting the needs of children is from the rights-based approach and the participation of the community, particularly the grassroots community. Several of these have arisen around the globe, some with the support of a state like Chile. It has one of the world's highest commitments to its youngest children, i.e., 0.75 percent of its Gross Domestic Product is for early childhood development, while Malaysia's contribution is 0.15 percent (World Bank, 2023). In the Central American region, Jean-Friedman-Rudovsky (2018) brings to light the incredible story of a group of women who moved forward the children from their Indigenous communities through their community-based approach. The Bernard Van Leer Foundation supported program between 1990 to 2008 brings to light the women's use of mother tongue and local language education in addition to the use of learning corners for various activities. The program used in the national model had its roots in their organization, i.e., the Association for Holistic and Multidisciplinary Development. This study, part of a series of historical case studies, provides a clear example of innovative ways of community-based kindergarten organizations.

### **Mapping Civil Society Kindergarten Initiatives**

The narrative of the needs of children in several pockets in Peninsular Malaysia began to change in the late 1960s, as civil society began to take initiatives to address the needs of children from plantation communities. The earliest was the effort of the Persatuan Kemajuan Rakyat (PKR, People's Development Movement), with an integral developmental approach established in 1968 in Negeri Sembilan (PKR, 1971). This effort addressed, among others, kindergarten education for the children of plantation labor in Negeri Sembilan. It was a collaborative effort, including workers, unions, religious leaders, and the State government. Other groups included Catholic nuns from the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary who set up kindergartens in a few estates on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, Klang, and one estate near Kuantan between 1955 and 1970 (Catholic et al. Malaysia, Singapore Brunei, 1977).

Another initiative was parish-based kindergartens, which Bettelheim and Taknishi (1976) brought to the fore, reaching children from surrounding neighborhoods. Bettelheim and Takanishi also highlight Sister Denise Paquette's efforts in initiating training of kindergarten teachers and the setting up of the Persatuan Tadika Malaysia (PTM, Malaysian Kindergarten Association).

Other efforts were made by the Education and Welfare Research Foundation (EWRF) in 1978 (EWRF, 1982), an initiative of academia, professionals, and the business community from middle-class Indians. Next was Child Information and Holistic Development (CHILD), established in 1984 ([www.ngohubasia](http://www.ngohubasia)) by professionals to bring holistic development to children from less privileged Tamil communities for preschool education, supported by volunteers. In addition to the above efforts, Kooperasi Kredit Rakyat (KKR, People's Credit

Cooperative) set up kindergartens in plantations around Batang Berjuntai and Kuala Selangor in the State of Selangor (Lim, 1984). Plantation workers and temple committees supported these initiatives. Another initiative was initiated by a group of students from the University of Malaya's Tamil Language Society. Their initiative, Kaalvi Khuzhu (Education Group), to set up and improve kindergartens, among other education programs, in several estates in Sungei Siput evolved in 1977 through a community-based approach. However, Kaalvi Khuzhu transformed into *Alaigal* (Waves) to confront labor, eviction, and other issues (Subramaniam, 2020). Many other smaller groups and individuals together made an effort to bridge the needs of children in marginalized communities through education. Devaraj (1993) raises questions about this route being ineffective in challenging the exploitative nature of work and living conditions of plantation workers and their communities.

### **The role of community-based approaches in addressing kindergarten children's needs in Malaysia**

Literature supporting evidence of marginalized communities making a difference in the complexities of their lives is only slowly emerging in Malaysia. One which has come into the public domain is Partners of Community Organisations (Pacos), which evolved in 1987 but was registered in 1997 ([pacostrust.com](http://pacostrust.com)), working with the Indigenous communities in Sabah. Pacos's kindergartens were set up at the request of the villagers. These are known as community learning centres, going beyond a kindergarten in that these centres act as libraries and meeting points for community discussions. While the centres follow the Ministry of Education Curriculum for kindergartens, there are added components for learning traditional knowledge. These include local languages, traditional farming, and cultural taboos. Teachers and children are from the same village. These centres coordinated by Pacos are also present in some areas in Sarawak.

Similar to the efforts of Pecos are those undertaken through the Pusat Pendidikan Komuniti (PDK, Community Learning Centres) through the initiatives of teachers, schools, and the community among the Indigenous population (Wan & Idrus, 2021). These centres, which are also for kindergarten children, include the element of indigenous learning supported by an NGO, providing lesson plans, among others, while the teachers and the children come from the community. While children learn Malay, they can communicate in their mother tongue.

These initiatives have a common thread, that of the community taking the initiative to meet the needs of their children through collaborators working with teachers from within the community. Another common area is the use of mother tongue education, which the UNICEF supports through projects in different regions of the world, given the proven efficacy of learning in the first language of the child ([www.unicef.org/media](http://www.unicef.org/media)). This is also the stand of UNESCO ([www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org)).

This study aims to fill the gap in how community-based approaches make a difference in meeting the needs of children from marginalized communities. PGT, as the largest community-based civil society group with a large base of women kindergarten teachers who began in their plantations and had their own training for twenty years, is justified as a case study. In 1996, PGT had 3282 children enrolled in 105 kindergartens, of which 68 were in plantations. There were 120 teachers (PGT Data, 2024). These figures demonstrate how PGT moved to meet the needs of children in marginalized communities.

### **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative methodology using the case study design was employed to gather data through in-depth interviews based on open-ended and semi-structured questions. Interviewees selected were from a mixed group comprising six senior teachers with more than twenty years of experience as community kindergarten teachers, an Executive Committee member, five former students of these teachers, and two parents involved in PGT's community kindergartens. Three individuals who were involved historically in the evolvement of PGT, two fieldworkers, and a collaborator were also included. They were between 20 years and 67 years old. The objective was to bring together different perspectives by recalling their experience. The interviews took place in three different regions, i.e., the North, Central, and Southern regions of Peninsular Malaysia, where PGT operates community-based kindergartens, between April 2021 to October 2022. Most of these interviews were face-to-

face during the later stage of Covid-19, when state borders were opened. Some were via Zoom meetings. In total, primary data was gathered from twenty interviewees. Interviews in Tamil and English were digitally recorded, translated from Tamil into English, transcribed and coded according to themes, and analyzed. Relevant interviews from historical archives were included. Besides interviews, data was sourced from bulletins, newsletters, and photographs.

As the plantation realities were oppressive, Paulo Freire's concept of democratization of education was employed as a guiding framework to understand and analysed how children's needs were met through community-based organizations within a social justice framework. Freire's lived experience as a child was the basis of his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, pioneering the understanding and praxis of democracy in education. His revolutionary strategy was grounded in the realities of people's lives, their suffering, and their hopes (Freire, 1990). In so doing, Freire challenged the dominant paradigm of education, which followed the capitalist model. He critiqued the "banking system" of education which did not allow for knowledge construction nor thirst for knowledge by the learner by participation in the process but rather, children just "deposited" the information gained. Freire emphasized the concept of "co-intentionality," that of the primacy of the conversation between teacher and student, bringing about the process of education.

Our research indicates that the Freirean approach was used in that children were co-constructors of knowledge. In addition, the stakeholders, comprising teachers, principally women, parents, and other community members, actively participated. They collaborated with individuals and organizations from outside the plantation as well as among themselves. However, there are limitations to this analysis as the plantation workers' community was involved in the kindergarten initiatives but not any labor movement with regard to their exploitation. The study is also limited to groups/organizations which are community-based and related to PGT.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### PGT's Background

PGT, a grassroots community-based kindergarten teachers association, registered as a non-governmental organization in 1991 after changing its organizational structure as a kindergarten teachers' council through the Consumer Association of Taiping (CAT). Such a development enabled PGT to be independent and focus on its kindergarten intervention, explains Puspha Doraisamy, PGT's founding president. Taiping, a small town in the northern area of Peninsular Malaysia, was surrounded by rubber plantations. PGT's community-based approach to addressing the needs of children from marginalized communities. A team from CAT went in search of kindergarten teachers in plantations around Taiping had meetings with them, potential teachers, and parents/community, taking cognizance of children's needs, the state of kindergartens and the lack of training of teachers as Puspha D highlights, moving from estate to estate from around Taiping and heading North to other areas of Perak and also Kedah.

Consequently, a group of eight teachers was sent for community-based teachers' training in Seremban in 1988, organized by PKR. Thanama Manickam (65 years old) o shares that training was in PKR community-based kindergartens and also after class, preparation of lesson plans and charts, creating teaching aids with recyclable materials, etc. Subsequently, an exposure program of five days to PKR kindergartens was arranged to study how PKR operated its kindergartens. As a next development, kindergarten teachers were brought together to be prepared as change agents through a community leadership training in July 1989, a program that empowered teachers to empower parents/community for children's wellbeing. PGT continued these programs since its involvement.

The community-based orientation of PGT stems from the influence of individuals who brought their social justice orientations with them through the organisations they were involved with. These influences came through the changes in consumer movements globally coming to Malaysia through the International Organisation of Consumer Unions (IOCU) headquartered in Penang, the Consumer Association of Penang (CAP) as Hilton (2007) traces this influence by way of changes in the consumer movement orientation in the United States of America. Another influence was the social teachings of the Catholic Church through the Second Vatican Council (1962 -1965), a tradition of the Catholic church to gather bishops from around the

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world in Rome for reflections. Fr. Pierre Bretaudeau, a priest from the Missionaries of Paris (MEP) who attended the closing session of Vatican Two, was responsible for establishing PKR. The research done collaboratively was on the needs of children, as shown in Figure 1. It resulted in an education campaign in fifty estates.



Figure 1 shows workers' concerns about children's schooling (Source: PKR Report, 1968 to 1971 (PKR 1971).

Another influence was through the involvement of organic intellectuals originating from working class background as Gramsci (1971) distinguished. One such person was the late Dr. Paul Sinnapan, a son of rubber tappers, who played a pivotal role in addressing not only the needs of children from marginalized communities but also those of teachers and parents, and/the community through the community leadership program, which continued until 2010. Dr Paul was a founding member of the People Service Organisation (PSO) which is related with KKR. PGT was also influenced by Kaalvi Khuzhu's community-based approaches through worksheets preparation and ways of working with communities as Fatima Joseph (64 years old shares). Puspaa Krishnan attended the former while Francis Xavier Anthonysamy observed meetings in the late 1980s. These worksheets were developed based on children's context which Fatima learned from a community kindergarten initiative in an urban pioneer *kampung* (village) along Old Klang Road in Kuala Lumpur supported by a church. Catholic nuns provided training for the teachers in community-based kindergartens in the 1970s.

While there were more influences, another key influence was the support and funding PGT received from the Bernard Van Leer Foundation between 1994 to 2006, including funding for sustaining PGT through the Asian Institute for Early Childhood Care and Education (AIECCE), established in 2008. In relation to PGT, the Bernard van Leer Foundation (BvLF) closely followed the directions and orientations of the Netherlands' development assistance policy, as Kazimierczuk (2015) discusses, evidenced in its respect, support and empowerment of PGT's grassroots operations and processes. PGT's grassroots orientation was supported by the Childhood Enhancement Through Training and Action (CHETNA) initiative from India to enable a clearer understanding and praxis of those community initiatives (Bernard van Leer 1996). Consequently, PGT brought a development orientation and involved the marginalized in contextualizing their realities and those of their children. It resulted in the holistic development of children of plantation workers through kindergarten and preparation for transition into primary school.

## The Needs of Marginalized Children

The needs of children from marginalized communities living in rubber plantations and in the fringes of urban areas were marked by the complexities of the life of their parents/ community. Children were victimized, too.

### Care, Education, and Child Labour

The PGT team discovered kindergarten teachers with low academic qualifications, i.e. Standard Six, or at most Form Three (i.e., three years of secondary schooling). There was no syllabus to follow, and they did not know how to teach, a point Terese, a team member, makes. In addition, she says that materials were lacking.

Another need was for child care. Mothers who were rubber tappers left for work at 4 am, left their younger children in the care of their elder siblings, while those who were weeders left their children at 6 am in the creche as Puspam Pitchai (60 years old), a kindergarten teacher in an estate in Asahan, near Malacca, shares. After five years of secondary schooling, she started teaching in the estate's nursery in 1986. She taught children to write a, b, and c, learn to count from 1 to 10, and give them notebooks to write, which were sometimes returned blank. These children who sat on the floor at home to write did not have pencils most of the time, she said. Neither could their parents help them as they had little or no schooling.

The language children used was foul, she said, reflecting on the cause. There was fighting at home as fathers went to the toddy shop after 6 pm and came home drunk, she recalls. Toddy, a coconut-based alcohol, was introduced by the British colonialists as a form of diverting labor attention (Stenson, 2018). However, not all fathers from the plantation working class were alcoholics.

The findings of PGT teachers resonate with several studies that have focused on child care and conditions of children in the 1980s and 1990s. Yusof, Ooi, and Wong (1987) revealed that estate childcare facilities were the worst in terms of physical facilities, environment, health as well as staff education level. Sridaran (1987) highlights how older children, especially the girl child, play the role of caregiver as mothers are occupied with chores at home and work. It also resonates with what other senior teachers Pachaamma Muniyandi (65 years old), Daivaigi Menon (67 years old), Malathi Kuppasamy (52 years old), Salvi Subramaniam (and Ranchany Lata Rajoo (related about children being left in creche where one *ayah* (creche worker) looks after about forty babies and toddlers. These babies sleep in cloth-type cradles which are hung from the ceiling.

Puspam's narrative continues about how children had to step in to help their parents to collect scrap rubber and clean the cups so parents could focus on meeting the tapping quota. Other teachers also share that it was common for children to help parents collect scrap rubber in rubber plantations or collect loose fruit from the undergrowth, depending on the crop in the estate. Jomo et al. (1984) documented a problem of child labor in a period when Malaysia's affirmative policy, i.e., the New Economic Policy, was in place. Children's role in contributing towards family income, as Jomo et al. highlight, and child care facilities, including kindergartens, which were of poor quality, led to a lack of preparation for primary school.

### Nutrition, health, and hygiene

The poverty of the parents due to low wages is also related to poor nutrition. Some children came without breakfast, while others brought black coffee or tea in a glass bottle. To address this need, some estates supplied powdered milk and biscuits while others provided condensed milk, which was sweet. Black tea or coffee was what Puspam had as a child, and tapioca when her family could not afford rice. Malathi, who by nature is cheerful, recalls her childhood of times when "our stomachs were empty, but our hearts were full." Though both father and mother were rubber tappers, the income was insufficient to meet the family's food needs. In another example, when rice was available, a common meal was rice with rasam, rice with sambar, or rice with curry without any vegetables or fish or chicken, shares Lata. Chicken or fish was available once a month while curry made with vegetables from around the estates was a regular, recall the teachers.

Besides these needs, children in the estate had worm infestation. This need for hygiene resonates with research as teachers share that toilets were far away and children excreted in drains, particularly at night. In addition, they do not wear footwear when playing outdoors. Yusof et al. (1987) report a lack of toilets in childcare centers in 11.5 percent of estates studied, thus leading to children easing themselves in drains, bushes, and rivers. In

another example, Nurhayati et al. (2003) illumine studies by four authors on parasitic infection in estates between 1978 and 1989. Thus, children needed care, education, health, and hygiene, which PGT presented to the state through memorandums proposing that estate kindergartens be brought under one umbrella, i.e., the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, as Manickam (2009) reveals.

### **Teacher Preparation**

PGT's response to meet the needs of children marginalized through teacher preparation evolved from the context of the stakeholders and its orientation through its many influences. In addition, individuals from a wide spectrum of Malaysian civil society contributed to its programs. This training was staggered initially over six years, as Pachiammal recalls her Level One training in 1989, completing Level Six in 1994. Subsequently, it was over four years. Puspa Krishnan, who took over from Puspha Doraisamy, explains that the level of difficulty and degree of commitment required from teachers was arranged in six levels, i.e., from Level One to Level Six, with supported learning assistance in the first few levels. Both these programs and their features are what PGT institutionalized from the beginning.

### **PGT's Community-based kindergartens**

The contextual preparation of the teacher from the community concerning the needs of the child, the reality of the teacher and the parents/community is implemented in the community kindergarten. Thus, a PGT community-based kindergarten has the following elements:

- is located in the community & led by a PGT-trained teacher/undertraining
- collects low fees/no fees
- uses innovative low-cost teaching aids
- is supported by parents/community
- teacher network/PGT Team

#### **Located in the community, led by a PGT teacher**

As plantations were isolated and distant from towns, a teacher outside the community would have logistic problems reaching the estate. Therefore, the kindergarten serving the community needed to be located there. The fact that the teacher and children were from the same social class provided an understanding and ensured empathy for the child. Parents share that their children would not have a kindergarten education without Malathi's commitment as a kindergarten teacher in the estate. In another area, a father shares how the teacher, Salvi, cares for the children, where children are taught with love and affection. These are points that all parents and children in this study echo.

#### **Parents/community support**

PGT trainees teaching in a kindergarten in an estate immediately implemented what they learned through their Level One training. Malathi explains that trainees were required to set up a parent support group as the teacher "has only two hands." While the support has a structure consisting of the chairperson and other office bearers, Malathi elaborates that the role of the group is to take collective responsibility for the wellbeing of the children. It includes organizing activities through the support of the parents through structured meetings and activities. This institutionalized practice is illustrated through PGT's logo. This reflects the philosophy of PGT, which is that adults should support the child. It embodies adults caring for the well-being of the child.

#### **Teacher networking**

A PGT teacher is supported by a network of other PGT teachers serving communities close to one another in a particular district. The district-level gathering, which began in 1989, had training sessions for teachers on organizing sports and preparing simple charts for use in kindergartens, as shown in Figure 2.





**Figure 2:** Teachers preparing teaching and learning materials

Such coming together to learn was expanded by gathering teachers in their respective districts as PGT evolved. Janakey Kanisan Sandhu, a field worker of twenty-one years, recalls district meetings were once in three months in each of the eighteen to twenty districts where PGT kindergartens are located. These district meetings were an important part of building solidarity between teachers, enabling them to plan and coordinate programs at the district level. These included annual sports, concerts, and cultural events like Ponggal. Together with teacher interactions at the centralized training in Taiping and the South, district-level meetings allowed teachers to exchange ideas, share problems, and find solutions.

Malathi is grateful for senior teachers sharing about activities that enabled her to learn how to communicate with parents and win them over. Such a practice promotes the development of social capital, which is essential for building relationships. In a study on Hong Kong kindergarten teacher practices, Keung & Cheung (2023), identify that family-school and community partnerships support professional development among teachers as well as build trust when they share and collaborate to improve play activities for children. Collaboration and building of trust is visible in PGT's networking of teachers as well as a representation of parents who participate in community activities at the district level.

Pachaiammal says that the PGT "family spirit" evolved through the teachers' first training and spills over into the district meetings, EXCO meetings, and all PGT activities. That family spirit finds its way to the kindergarten for the well-being of children. Suresh seeing Selvy as a big sister and not a teacher gives a glimpse of this spirit.

### **Low fees/no Fees**

This family spirit is reflected in the low fees or fee exemption for children given the low salaries of parents, which were below that of the manufacturing sector worker. For rubber tappers, wages were M\$ 147.80, while for the latter, it was M\$ 430.44 (Insan, 1989). The mid-term review of the 4<sup>th</sup> Malaysian plan reported an increase in the poverty of plantation workers, increasing from 35 percent in 1980 to 55 percent in 1983 (GOM, 1984). Teachers collected RM5.00 per child. Though fees increased gradually, it was insufficient to meet expenses, especially after estate closures and eviction of workers. When kindergartens were in the plantations, there were no rental or utility bills to be paid. However, as PGT kindergartens shifted to urban areas, low fees posed a real challenge as there were rentals, utilities, and other expenses to be met, says Lata, who has children of low-income single mothers among her students. However, she, along with teachers, continued to accept whatever fees parents could afford to pay. The 'family spirit' encourages PGT teachers to give their children access to a contextual learning experience.

### **Uses Low-Cost, Innovative Teaching and Learning Material**

Another identified theme was using low-cost teacher-innovated teaching and learning material for children's holistic development, contextually. What was available in town was not suitable and expensive, says Salvi. In another example, Sharvenneswary Sivanandan (23 years old) from Teluk Intan is grateful to her teacher, Daivaigi, for making so many materials for her and her friends to play with and learn. This was "the start of my learning," she says. These teaching aids, which were thematic and based on lesson plans, reflected the context of the children and were culturally inclusive. Puspa K explains that teachers created materials based on 24 themes, prepared for the six strands of the National Standard Preschool Curriculum integrating the six areas of the NPC i.e.,

language and communications

Cognitive development

Moral & Spiritual Education

Physical development

Socio-emotional development

Aesthetic and creativity

These themes were placed in six learning corners around the classrooms for one week or more, depending on how much time children needed for integrated learning as practiced in a PGT community-based kindergarten. Figure 3 and 4 shows the interior of a PGT community-based kindergarten with teacher-created learning material.



**Figure 3:** A PGT community-based kindergarten-1



Figure 4: A PGT community-based kindergarten-2

### Meeting Children's Needs Through the Community-Based Kindergarten

Caring for the well-being of the children in the context of marginalized communities following the PGT approach takes a broad perspective. It includes caring for the child's physical and socio-emotional needs as well as education. Sharvenneswary shares about the fun way she learned at her kindergarten and how she always looked forward to being in her kindergarten. She recalls her teacher providing drinks for those who did not have breakfast. Shalini Suresh (20 years old), another undergraduate from Salvi's kindergarten, says she did not know she had so many friends as she usually did not go out to play. She became excited and was very happy to see friends her age. The time at kindergarten from 8 am to 12 pm was spending quality time, she said, meaning she could talk to her friends whom she became close with as there was no one her age at home. "We talked a lot," she says as she laughs and continues, "We talked about whatever we could at our age". These examples demonstrate caregiving in a PGT community-based kindergarten through the teacher who attends to the physical as well as socio-emotional needs, allowing children to be themselves while caring for their needs.

### Kindergarten Uniforms

Another aspect of care is related to uniforms. Children in PGT kindergartens wear uniforms. When asked why, Thanama explains that children were coming in primary school uniforms to the kindergarten which were handed down from their older siblings. Others came in oversized clothes, shirts without buttons, and clothes that were torn or dirty. Yet others came in clean clothes. "So, we called for a parent meeting to discuss the problem of uniforms", recalls Thanama. A collective decision was for all children to wear uniforms. But the problem was the lack of affordability for many parents to buy the uniforms. Through community activities such as temple festivals, teachers and parents to set up stalls selling food and drinks to raise funds for bulk purchase of uniforms

Lata reflects on the issue of uniforms. Besides affordability, she says children have dignity when wearing these uniforms as their social class becomes invisible. These similar concerns stand out in a study on school uniforms in Northern Ireland, which Mc Murray (2021) brings to light. Children felt that their poverty levels remain unknown to their friends. In addition, charity groups and the state have acted to keep the costs of uniforms

down. In the Malaysian setting, Woo, Tam, and Bonn (2020) analyzed how school uniforms reduce socioeconomic differences. Thus, the challenges, resulting thoughts and efforts of a small group of grassroots communities, resonates with the macro setting at a higher schooling level and in a local and global context.

### **Mother Tongue and Multi-Lingual Learning**

The wellbeing of children continues to take place through the PGT curriculum bringing care and education through multiple ways of teaching and learning for a co-construction of knowledge. For PGT, an important aspect is to make the child comfortable by taking cognisance of the language the child uses at home, i.e., the mother tongue. As already established, plantation workers were largely Tamil or from other South Indian States. However, Tamil is the commonly used language. Thus, PGT trains its teachers to begin with Tamil. Children learn the national language and English as was introduced through the PKR training in 1988 and subsequently, 1989.

Closely examining charts and other teaching aids in a PGT kindergarten shows three languages being used. With such an approach, transition to school was easy for PGT children. “I was in Pachaiammal teacher’s kindergarten for three years. Teacher taught us in Tamil and I also learned Bahasa Malaysia” (Kayal Villy, 45 years old). So too her siblings and subsequently, her three children, she adds. Kayal is a trained teacher, teaching Bahasa Malaysia and Mathematics in a Tamil primary school. She attests that seventy percent of children who went to Pachaiammal’s kindergarten are primary school teachers. Tarani, a medical student in a local university, shares that being in a Tamil kindergarten, she learned in Tamil first, then in Bahasa Malaysia and English.

### **Multiple Ways of Learning**

Findings further revealed various ways of learning in the PGT kindergarten as well as activities outside the kindergarten. PGT educators use multiple ways of co-constructing knowledge through a child-centered pedagogy. They used various methods, including literature genre, from poems to songs, story-telling, and drama using teaching aids. Shalini recalls one way, a song, and dance. She laughs as she remembers the fun she had singing and dancing to the tune of cleanliness, *Sutham Yembethe Namake* (Cleanliness is Our Way), mopping the stage when she was six years old. She credits her teacher, Salvi, for her commitment to ensuring children had fun as they learned.

Das Gupta (2018) illustrated with practical examples how these ‘low-cost or no-cost’ materials stimulate exploration and thinking, promote interaction, and develop vocabulary. Yuvaraj Shammugam (26years old) a teacher, credits Malathi for providing an environment surrounded by materials they used in many ways, allowing them a “platform to be creative” he says.

Teacher-innovated materials also included worksheets for the writing component of the curriculum. An example is illustrated through workbooks compiled and published also through the support of the Bernard Van Leer Foundation in 1997. PGT evolved its workbooks by compiling selected thematic worksheets for various learning areas. The picture of the book cover illustrates multi-cultural components such as clothes, places of worship, in addition to importance of family and friends in the PGT approach.



Figure 5: PGT's workbooks

The picture of the family sitting under the rubber trees shows the scene's context. However, in reality, workers rush through their breakfast cum lunch packed from home, sitting under the rubber trees and bitten by mosquitoes.

Storytelling was another way in which teachers interacted with children. Sharvenneswary recalls how her teacher started telling stories by involving them. Cats were a favorite topic, she says. As children, they all liked to talk, she says. Malathi relates how a child added to her story on fowls, that wild fowls fly. In the co-construction of knowledge, Malathi extends the child's knowledge by asking questions about the distance they fly compared to birds. Thus, the Freirean concept of "co-intentionality" is at work in the PGT kindergarten at the children's level.

### Activities Outside the Kindergarten

PGT's community leadership program provided a pathway for teachers to involve the community actively in the care and education of its children through organizing community programs like sports, concerts, and festivals. For children, concerts were a hit. Shalini is very reflective about how her teacher has "thought to that

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extent and thought differently” as she relates how her teacher used different themes each year for the annual prize-giving day, which comes with a concert. One year the theme was colours, she recalls and every performance was based on colours. Another year, it was vegetables, like vegetables talking, and “I was dressed as a chilly,” she laughs, saying each talked about their specialty as a king comes visiting. When asked about what she gained, she attests to how she learned to create a dialogue, not to have stage fear, and “It was all teamwork. Even if I forgot, the person next to me would tell me”. This perspective comes after many years but yet clear in her mind. Such concerts were multicultural. The photograph in Figure 7 shows such elements. Indian children are dressed in Malay costumes and the bunga manggar, which is part of Malay ceremonial decorations.



**Figure 6:** PGT concert showing multi-culturalism

PGT also organized other events, one of which was Ponggal, the harvest festival of the Tamil community as shown in Figure 7.



**Figure 7:** Ponggal celebration

Sports was another community event. Suresh shares what he liked about sports done in front of the temple.

“It was like school sports. Everyone joins in. But at the end, there will be games for parents of the kindergarten children and games for past pupils of the kindergarten. She gets everyone involved and makes us all happy”.

Such community events were rotated between local and district levels.

The efforts of PGT’s community-based kindergarten teachers have changed the participation of children and parents. The voices of parents and former students reflect their gratitude. Yuva brings the context in which his teacher Malathi and others like her teaching in rural areas are struggling a lot with few facilities and adds that government needs to give “extra facilities”. A parent Nalini Massapu (47 years old) credits Daivaigi for her commitment to not only providing academic learning but also values, including religious values through additional classes outside of school hours. Suresh adds to this thought. Parents may bring up their children at home but the efforts and struggles of a kindergarten teacher is very *sayang* (endearing) because each child is different from the other, he says. She has to meet so many differences. He continues about the importance of patience as a quality, to “care for the child like their own child”. I am saying it from my experience, she (referring to Salvi) does it very well.

These voices reflect PGT’s contextualized teacher preparation using processes in its curriculum delivery to meet the needs of children from marginalized communities. It increases the versatility of PGT teachers in creating materials and composing songs. In addition, teachers are trained to use a variety of ways to ensure they come down to the child’s level and help the child learn. Thus, a select group of PGT senior teachers cum trainers were sent by the Bernard Van Leer Foundation to Hyderabad and Orrisa in India to train ECCE teachers and heads of NGOs from India, Bangladesh and Indonesia, says Puspa. PGT also brought its contextualized approach to train community educators from Sabah and Sarawak to meet the kindergarten needs of groups of marginalized children from these two States, demonstrating the applicability of PGT’s approach.

### **PGT’s Effort at Sustaining Its Program**

Another theme that emerged was the effort PGT made with the support of the Bernard Van Leer Foundation in order to sustain its programs. Lawrence Sinniah, a PGT collaborator, shares that there was a realization at an EXCO retreat that PGT made a difference to children from marginalized communities. For this purpose, research personnel were hired to document the process at centralized training and local sites. This document was brought to three teams of senior PGT teachers at three locations for their feedback. It was then professionalized and developed into a curriculum for a Diploma in Community-Based Preschool Education aligning with the philosophy of PGT. A Programme Standard was then prepared according to the requirements of the Malaysian Qualifying Agency to offer PGT’s unique approach to training for preschool teachers. But PGT did not have the funds to take this to a second phase continued Lawrence. A meeting with the Economic Planning Unit attended by a small group, including Puspa Krishnan, in 2014, did not move forward either, says Lawrence. However, it can potentially be adopted and used for training teachers to meet the kindergarten needs of marginalized groups, including refugee children.

### **A Comparative Analysis of PGT And Other Civil Society Groups**

PGT’s contextual methodology is similar to the efforts of organizations it was linked with, i.e., PKR, the People Service Organization, a credit cooperative, and Kaalvi Khuzhu. This relates with teachers coming from the community and playing the role of change agents through the kindergarten. Its use of teaching aids comes from PKR. However, while PKR initiated kindergarten teacher training, it eventually discontinued this training while PGT continued for twenty years. PGT stood out in terms of its training support for lower-level trainees at the centralized training and on-site, including support from field workers. PGT’s training included the use of the mother tongue and the significance of informal exchanges among trainees and also trainers, while other training providers used English and input methods of delivery without on-site support. PGT had a strong networking at the district level among teachers. While some civil society groups did not have community kindergartens, moved on to other areas of work, or ceased to exist, like PKR, PGT continued its approach and presence in the community, though it has faced various challenges. PGT data shows that in 2006, there were 3199 children enrolled in 134 kindergartens in 18 districts. Most were in urban areas because of estate closure and eviction in

18 districts. An informal study of 140 Tamil youth under eighteen showed that 90 percent had attended preschool. However, the majority had low levels of literacy and numeracy. This indicates the importance of the right approach for primary school transition and future school success.

## CONCLUSION

This paper set out to identify and analyze the needs of marginalized children in Malaysia and how these were addressed through community-based kindergartens. PGT's approach demonstrates an alternative pathway to learning PGTs through a context-sensitive methodology with active parents/community support. While PGT made gains in academic and non-academic areas, there were limitations, particularly in macro-related issues such as nutrition, given the rising food costs and the community's low income. This paper has brought voices from the margins. These include the voices of youth who were once in these kindergartens, sharing their gains and those of their friends who are looking for a place in the Malaysian economy as a result of that meeting of needs through their kindergartens. The method in which PGT evolved to meet the needs of marginalized children holistically and integrally through the context-sensitive process-based methodology has value to be offered to marginalized children in Malaysia and elsewhere through a community-based teacher-training curriculum.

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